VIRTUALLY QUEER

"Virtually Queer" is a JGLIE feature that glosses questions concerning the intersection of networked digital technologies[1] and broadly speaking, both theoretical and empirical accounts that pertain to what Buckland (2002) calls, "queer world-making." This interdisciplinary feature explores contemporary theory, research, and occasionally, specific Internet environments, concerned with (a) the production, performance, and representation of queer world-making, (b) locations and communities where the possibility for the transformation of existing inequitable conditions is prioritized, and (c) the retooling and re/mediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2001) of performances of QLGBTTQI[2] identities and communities.

Conjuring the Quotidian

Mary Bryson

ABSTRACT. This essay explores contemporary accounts of the significance of the Internet and the intersections of these cyberspace narratives with theoretical and material construals of queer identity, agency, and community. The author discusses evidence of the ongoing mediative role of artifacts in the fashioning of identity in community in order to explore the notion that queer is always-already virtual. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@ haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Internet, cyberspace, lesbian and gay studies, media studies, queer theory

Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, Vol. 2(4) 2005
Available online at http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JGLED
© 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J367v02n04_06

My working model for conjuring an account of the quotidian significance of the Internet is Buckland's study of the cultural significance of New York City club culture. Buckland (2002) provides an insightful analysis of queer community, and the social worlds within which specific embodied practices, artifacts, locations and social relations mediate participation in a complex process of staking out and forging space, identity and a political imaginary. Buckland argues that:

> Queer world-making is a conscious, active way of fashioning the self and the environment, cognitively and physically, through embodied social practices . . . to construct affirming environments of existence . . . Strategies of queer world-making produced spaces where people could exist as queer and make pleasure . . . in which queer subjectivities and intersubjectivities were made possible. (p. 19)

Accounts of the social, cultural, and/or educational significance of cyberspace tend to fall into the trap posed by the lure of the dramatic–and so it is commonplace to read exorbitant claims concerning the replacement of the real with the virtual, embodiment with interface + data, authentic engagement with simulation. In extolling the taken-for-granted liberatory effects of the Internet for the subaltern, the following claim made by Jeff Dawson (2003, pp. 3-4), in a recent edition of his widely distributed *Gay and Lesbian Online*, is quite typical. "The Web has reduced geographic and social borders to a few cyber clicks . . . As a multidimensional mosaic of the best of our culture, the Web subverts the once-high barriers of geography, race, and religion." And we shouldn't be surprised by this phenomenon. After all, media historians (Marvin, 1988) have carefully documented the tendency for wild and exaggerated deterministic predictions about the effects of new technologies, both dystopian and utopian, few of which prove accurate. Queer communities exist simultaneously under, inside of, and actively resisting and contesting the specter of invisibility, the injustices of discrimination, and the harm of stigmatization. It is, then, particularly important that we resist the temptation to posit that these new technologies will, for example, solve longstanding problems such as social alienation, rampant homophobia, or lack of access to relevant and appropriate knowledge and/or facilitate the development of positive networks.

However, since there is a dearth of research on marginalized sexualities and the Internet,[3] twinned with a tendency to avoid discussion of queer sexualities in academic scholarship on cyberspace, it is vi-

tal both that we investigate the actual meaning of and uses of new media within queer communities, and that we speculate about the ways in which new tools and new social formations may engender profound shifts in queer cultures. My goal in this brief discussion is not to assess the value of claims that have been made about the likely impact of Internet tools and networks on queer folks and/or communities. Rather, it is to begin to reflect on some key discursive elements in the available strategies for telling research stories about the implications of virtual + queer that could potentially be generative of a different kind of interpretive framework for thinking about the significance of media in fashioning lives and locales populated by diverse members of stigmatized sexual minorities.

A good place to start, then, is to ask what "virtually" adds to "queer," since almost all contemporary accounts of *queer* invariably situate this slippery signifier as designative of a heterogeneous, historically and geographically contingent, contested and performative set of "identity effects" (Butler, 1993). Thus construed, *queer is always-already virtual* and much more about an endlessly deferred illusion of becoming than any authentic or finite quality of being; or as Smith (2004, p. 109) rather succinctly puts it, as "a solipsism of discourse." However, as I have argued elsewhere, "The tensions between postmodern challenges to identity politics and the material struggles of people identified as gay or lesbian constitute a starting-point for inquiry, and not an argument for dispensing with identity" (Bryson, 2002, p. 377). My interest in *the significance of the Internet as it is actually used, experienced, materially organized, and narrativized by queer folk and communities* lies in its potential to make visible traces and networks of queer cultural activities and social formations. I have an explicitly pedagogical interest in cyberspace as a powerful tool for learning to be, or perhaps more specifically, *to do*, queer. In this context, then, "virtually queer" marks the intersection between the performative and "in progress" qualities of queer culture and its manifestations and permutations engendered by networked digital technologies-construed as spaces and artifacts-as important mediative elements in the production of "queer."

So, how might we want to think about learning "to do" queer and the relationships between social networks, artifacts, and the, of necessity, unfinished project of "becoming queer"? Lave and Wenger's (1991) sociocultural model of learning as "legitimate peripheral participation" reframes and repositions learning from an individual (and cognate) process of knowledge acquisition, to the politically invested negotiation of participation in various communities of practice where engagement,

mediated by discourse, social relations and cultural artifacts, dialectically produces both identity and the fabric of community coherence and continuity. Ethnographic accounts of the struggle to forge queer community, create queer space, and engage in the complex and intersectional practices of identity formation highlight spatial, relational, and mediated elements similar to those emphasized in Lave and Wenger's model. Of interest here, specifically, are the resonances between studies of offline and online practices of queer identity and community formation.

Kennedy and Davis's (1993) classic study of the pre-Internet (1930s to 1960s) lesbian communities, in Buffalo, New York, emphasizes the central and critical role played by the location and culture of the bar in mediating women's libidinal, social, romantic, affliliative, and political investments in crafting, against the grain of heteronormativity, sexism, class biases, and racism, multiple modes of lesbian identity and sociality. Correll's (1995) fascinating study of the "Lesbian Café" (LC), a virtual bar that was created (and recreated) every time users logged on, indicates that a significant proportion of the participants in this online community lived in places where there were few or inadequate lesbian resources. Correll describes members of the LC as motivated by the same goals and interests as those who would frequent an offline lesbian bar, bookstore, or community center, namely, the desire to "make friends and establish more intimate relationships. Additionally, it is a place to gather for recreation, for advice, and to be 'around one's own kind'" (p. 286).

Tattelman's (2000) study of Saint Mark's Baths underscores the formative importance of place, artifacts, and community-specific cultural practices in providing entry to, and sustaining the transgressive sociopolitical geographies that Gordon Brent Ingram (1997) refers to as "queerscapes." Tattelman positions the cultural significance of our circulation in queerscapes in terms of the "passages across space [that] are central to our identities, outlooks, priorities, strategies for survival, "community," and for finding various forms of communality and "communion" (p. 32). A recent large-scale community-based study of Canadian gay men and sexual practices (Trussler, Marchand, & Barker, 2003) indicates that, at present, as many men are engaging in sexual activities in Internet chat rooms as bathhouses. Campbell's (2004) three-year study of gay men's experiences of, and participation in, three distinctive virtual locations characterized by affiliation with a very specific matrix of gendered identifications, sexual practices and preferences (#gaychub, #gaymuscle, and

#gaymusclebears) clearly demonstrates that these sites do not function as a disembodied fantasy space. Rather, as Campbell argues, seeking to understand everyday uses of the Internet "complicates the notions that there is a radical disjuncture between cyberspace and the physical world" (p. 100). The participants in Campbell's study integrated their uses of interactive online locations with offline activities, and in so doing, sought to expand their social network, affiliating with a critical mass of other gay men who were engaged in actively celebrating and/or contesting culturally normative notions of the "body beautiful."

Nicola Green and her colleagues (Green, Lacohee, & Wakeford (2001) at the INCITE lab (http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/incite/) report ethnographic data concerning the significance of networked technologies in gay men's communities in England. Like Campbell's study, this research focuses on the everyday uses of new media and the ways in which members of gay male communities have taken up and value new technologies as important props in the performance of "the thoroughly (post)modern homosexual." Participants, in this series of studies, indicate overwhelmingly that material culture is implicated in the construction of gay male identity and that, for gay men living in countries and locations where networked media are ubiquitous, ownership of and access to these artifacts are essential elements of gay culture. As one participant put it:

> I couldn't possibly exist without my mobile, it would be like I'd become invisible. I have to be able to talk whenever I want, stay in touch with what's happening. It's a real phenomenon the mobile phone, everyone has got one, I mean everyone. I think if you're gay you're born with one in your hand! (p. 7)

Continuities are very much in evidence in the ways in which new media are appropriated into existing cultural practices and social relations within queer (and other) communities. As Graham (2004) argues,

> Far from being a complete and revolutionary break with the past, new media maintain many intimate connections with old media, technologies, practices . . . infrastructures and spaces. Therefore, the so-called "information age" is best considered not as a revolution, but as a complex and subtle amalgam of new technologies and media fused on to, and "remediating," old ones. (pp. 18-19)

In a pilot study (Bryson, in press), focused on queer women and media (new and no-longer new), I found evidence both of continuity and re-

tooling. For example, while the Internet provided participants with vastly increased access to information and critical cultural knowledge, the women I interviewed continued to value the role of books in their lives. Books have, for a considerable time, functioned as highly significant artifacts mediating the construction of marginal sexual identities and imaginations, and as commonly recognizable markers of community membership (Weissman & Fernie, 1993). Participants interacted online with folks from a much more diverse set of geographic locations than in their offline communities. However, they were more likely to use the Net to communicate with people who lived close by than afar. While some women used the anonymity afforded by chat rooms to play with the performance of identities significantly different from their embodied ones (e.g., having sex as a gay man with other gay men), most reported that identities online (e.g., gender) were more stereotypically represented than in the physical realm, and it was evident that the seemingly "unmarked as white" assumed racial identity of all online interlocutors was as pervasive, if not more so, than offline.

There is a rather insidious way in which new media hype seeps into the framing of research discourses; a process of intertextuality that Lyman and Wakeford (1999) refer to as "the media tropes that substitute for genuine research" (p. 359). Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any researcher interested in constructing a useful understanding of new media is to insist on the tentative framing of an altogether different location from which to narrate adequate accounts of *virtually queer*–rather than to set out to track apparently radical and transformative media effects, it seems more fruitful to undertake the study of everyday queer world-making as problematic (to paraphrase Dorothy Smith, 1987). As Ingram insightfully observes:

> The queerscape will remain both vulnerable and volatile, and its texture and trajectories are worthy of careful examination before we can hope to survive as viable networks and communities or begin to effectively protect and enrich the relations for which many of us have crossed such distances. (p. 52)

NOTES

1. I am using "digital networked technologies" at the outset of this piece, rather than "the Internet" or "cyberspace" because of the way in which, in locations where access to these media is prevalent, networks and artifacts are becoming overwhelmingly convergent; that is, Mary's cell phone is connected to a laptop, that can connect to millions

of other computers world-wide, that is connected to a web cam, and so on . . . And as Miller and Slater (2000) point out in their groundbreaking work on ethnography and virtuality, "Contrary to the first generation of Internet literature . . . the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace;' rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" (p. 1).

2. Falling into the trap posed by the alphabet soup approach to the naming of queer folks, as I argued elsewhere (Bryson, in press), "does not imply a naïve assumption about any kind of straightforward relationship between such arbitrary markers of identification and universal aspects of being, ontology, or essence. Rather, as Gail Mason (2002) argues in her analysis of identity and homophobic violence, these deeply problematic, spatially and temporally situated, and contested signifiers discursively mediate the visibility of groups and have both subjugatory and liberatory effects."

3. An incomplete bibliography in this area would include: Addison & Comstock, 1998; Alexander, 2002; Berry & Yue, 2003; Bryson, in press; Case, 1996; Campbell, 2004; Correll, 1995; Gray, 2004; Green, Lacohee, & Wakeford, 2001; Munt, Bassett, & O'Riordan, 2002; O'Brien, 1999; Poster, 2002; Shaw, 1997; Wakeford, 1996/1997/2000; Wincapaw, 2000; Woodland, 2000.

REFERENCES

Addison, J., & Comstock, M. (1998). Virtually out: The emergence of a lesbian, bisexual and gay youth cyberculture. In J. Austin & M. Willard (Eds.), *Generations of youth* (pp. 367-378). New York: New York University Press.

Alexander, J. (2002). Queer webs: Representations of LGBT people and communities on the World Wide Web. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 7(2/3), 77-84.

Berry, C., Martin, F., & Yue, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Mobile cultures: New media in queer Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bolter, J., & Richard G. (2001). *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bryson, M. (in press). When Jill jacks in: Queer women and the Net. *Feminist Media Studies*.

Buckland, F. (2002). *Impossible dance: Club culture and queer world-making*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Butler, J. (1993). Imitation and gender subordination. In H. Abelove, M. Barale, & D. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (pp. 307-320). New York: Routledge.

Campbell, J. (2004). *Getting it on online: Cyberspace, gay male sexuality, and embodied identity*. New York: Haworth Press.

Case, S. E. (1996). *The domain matrix: Performing lesbian at the end of print culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Correll, S. (1995). The ethnography of an electronic bar. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24(3), 270-298.

Dawson, J. (2003). *Gay and lesbian online*. Los Angeles, CA: Advocate Books.

Graham, S. (2004). Beyond the "dazzling light": From dreams of transcendence to the "remediation" of urban life. *New Media & Society*, 6(1), 16-25.

Green, N., Lacohee, H., & Wakeford, N. (2001). *"Someone I should have deleted": The integration of new technologies into the lives of gay men in the UK*. Paper presented at a meeting of the Sexualities, Media, Technologies conference, University of Surrey. Retrieved July 4, 2003, from <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/incite/smtnicolagreenpaper.htm>

Gray, M. (2004). Coming of age in a digital era: Youth queering technologies in the rural United States. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego.

Ingram, G. B. (1997). Marginality and the landscapes of erotic alien(n)ations. In G. B. Ingram, A. Bouthillette, & Y. Retter (Eds.), *Queers in space: Communities, public spaces, sites of resistance* (pp. 27-52). Seattle, WA: Bay Press.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lyman, P., & Wakeford, N. (1999). Going into the (virtual) field. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3), 359-376.

Marvin, C. (1988). *When old technologies were new*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Miller, D., & Slater, D. (2000). *The Internet: An ethnographic approach*. Oxford: Berg.

Munt, S., Bassett, E., & O'Riordan, K. (2002). Virtually belonging: Risky connectivity and coming out online. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 7(2), 125-137.

O'Brien, J. (1999). Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction. In M. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (pp. 76-104). New York: Routledge.

Poster, J. (2002). Trouble, pleasure and tactics: Anonymity and identity in a lesbian chat room. In M. Consalvo & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Women and everyday uses of the Internet* (pp. 230-252). New York: Peter Lang.

Shaw, D. (1997). Gay men and computer communication: A discourse of sex and identity in cyberspace. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Virtual culture: Identity and communication in cybersociety* (pp. 133-145). London: Sage.

Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Tattelman, I. (2000). Presenting a queer bathhouse. In J. Boone, M. Dupois, M. Meeker, K. Quimby, C. Sarver, D. Silverman, & R. Weatherston (Eds.), *Queer frontiers: Millennial geographies, genders, and generations* (pp. 222-258). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Trussler, T., Marchand, R., & Barker, A. (2003). *By the numbers*. Vancouver, BC: Community-Based Research Centre.

Wakeford, N. (1996). Sexualized bodies in cyberspace. In W. Chernaik, M. Deegan & A. Gibson (Eds.), *Beyond the book: Theory, culture, and the politics of cyberspace* (pp. 93-104). London, UK: Centre for English Studies, University of London.

Wakeford, N. (1997). Networking women and girls with information/communication technology. In J. Terry & M. Calvert (Eds.), *Processed lives: Gender and technology in everyday life* (pp. 51-66). New York: Routledge.

Wakeford, N. (2000). Cyberqueer. In D. Bell, & B. Kennedy (Eds.), *The cybercultures reader* (pp. 403-415). New York: Routledge.
Weissman, A., & Fernie, L. (1993). *Forbidden love: The unashamed stories of lesbian lives*. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada.
Wincapaw. C. (2000). The virtual spaces of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 4(1), 45-59.
Woodland, R. (2002). Queer spaces, modem boys and pagan statues. In D. Bell, & B. Kennedy (Eds.), *The cybercultures reader* (pp. 416-431). New York: Routledge.